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MICHAEL GERACI

On March 1, 2012, Google intends to update their privacy policy, which was last revised back in 2009. To call it an “update” is misleading, because what the search behemoth is actually creating is a single unified policy that spans all of its 60+ services [1]. The very fact that you’re reading this is cause enough for me to assume that you are a computer user with, shall we say, an above average level of interest in matters of a social-technical-digital nature, so I won’t waste your time detailing all the ways that Google’s services permeate your life. Let’s just agree that these days, it’s hard to click a mouse (or touch the screen of a mobile device) without hitting a Google service — branded or not. What you may not know is that if you’re a regular user of Google services, such as the popular Gmail or the burgeoning Google+ social network, Google is keeping tabs on most of your Web surfing habits, if not all of them — especially if you are using the company’s Chrome browser — all in the name of improving your Web experience through the optimization and personalization of Google’s services.

Of course, Google isn’t the only corporation out there that wants to follow you around the Internet (and the physical world, for that matter). Facebook with its 845 million users [2] is much more infamous for its liberal policies that allow it to mostly do whatever it wants with the information it keeps, as is Dictionary.com, msn.com, comcast.net, photobucket.com, msnbc.com, and many other well-known online properties [3].

Google’s announcement of its policy overhaul was met with a significant amount of outrage and consternation from various factions about the Internet, most notably and publicly by its arch-rival Microsoft. The outcry was enough to get the United State’s congress involved via a bi-partisan letter, signed by eight members of the House of Representatives, asking

Google to provide them with more details about the policy maneuver [4]. A few days later, regulators for the EU asked Google to delay the policy change until it could be fully reviewed and its impact on European Internet users assessed [9] and [5].

Google has responded to the concerns of the U.S. Congress in a letter (available on the Web in Google Docs format, ironically) from the company's Director of Public Policy, Pablo Chavez. The 13-page document provides further clarity on the company's planned changes and answers the 11 questions posed to Google by the members of Congress [6].

One of Google's goals with the new policy is simplification and accessibility for end users. While the simple act of consolidating 60+ policies into one goes a long way towards this goal, a review of the new policy and the Google narrative surrounding it indicates that, indeed, there is very little jargon, ambiguity, and legalese in the new approach. For example:

How we use information we collect

We use the information we collect from all of our services to provide, maintain, protect and improve them, to develop new ones, and to protect Google and our users. We also use this information to offer you tailored content — like giving you more relevant search results and ads.

We may use the name you provide for your Google Profile across all of the services we offer that require a Google Account. In addition, we may replace past names associated with your Google Account so that you are represented consistently across all our services. If other users already have your email, or other information that identifies you, we may show them your publicly visible Google Profile information, such as your name and photo. (google.com/policies/privacy/preview)

While the thought of Google sending your photo around to other people without your consent may not supply you with lasting calm, let's be clear that it's nice to be told in no uncertain terms that it's happening. Herein lies what I feel is the important take away from all this business: Google is not doing anything in this new policy that it wasn't already doing in the past under more obscure and latent methodologies. By putting it up front and being clear about it, Google is, in my opinion, trying to adhere to its own motto of "not being evil." Just making it clear how much of your life they will be and always have been tracking doesn't really justify all the fervor that has been stirred up since the announcement, which, on

the off chance you didn't see it, was broadcast to Google users via notifications across many of its most popular services, including Search, Gmail, YouTube, and Google Docs. How many other Internet properties are you aware of that go to such lengths to make clear that something is changing with regards to your privacy?

Microsoft's response, which included full-page print ads in major newspapers across the country that feature the headline "Putting People First" feels a little disingenuous and opportunistic. By putting people first, does Microsoft mean to say that our ability to control our personal information outweighs their need for it when we use their products and services? A quick skim of their privacy policy indicates something different from what the new ad campaign suggests:

Microsoft collects and uses your personal information to operate and improve its sites and services. These uses include providing you with more effective customer service; making the sites or services easier to use by eliminating the need for you to repeatedly enter the same information; performing research and analysis aimed at improving our products, services and technologies; and displaying content and advertising that are customized to your interests and preferences [7].

The fact is, all of these companies, from Facebook to Google to Microsoft and even lesser known ones, require our information. It is the currency of the information age. Facebook isn't building state-of-the-art data centers around the world with sand dollars. They are spending the billions of dollars they make from selling highly targeted advertisements to its massive audience. Ninety-seven percent of Google's \$38 billion annual revenue comes from advertising (investors.google.com) and the conflation of all the user data from their numerous silos is likely going to help them in this endeavor. It's true that maybe our YouTube viewings should not be commingled with our Gmail messages and our search keywords. If I were truly paranoid, I may be concerned that a highly detailed and accurate picture of me could be extracted from the swirling pools of data in the Googleverse, but I understand and to some degree have surrendered to the notion that the price I pay for accurate Web searches, free e-mail, free productivity applications, and excellent cartographic resources (to name a few) is the information about who I am and what I like.

We all have our own threshold for how much privacy we are willing to give up in exchange for arguably better experiences on the Web. For those of you with low thresholds, there are a few things you can do:

- 1) Don't use Google products or services (I hear it's possible). Google's "data liberation front" provides a fairly comprehensive set of tools and resources for returning your life to its pre-Google status (dataliberation.org).
- 2) Opt out of as much information collection as you can. While it is impossible to completely opt out of all that Google collects, you can always use many Google properties without logging in.
- 3) Use your browser's privacy features to limit the amount of tracking devices attached to you while you surf.
- 4) Be aware. Google, unlike other information collectors, gives you access to what they have on you via the Google dashboard (at google.com/dashboard) and allow for you to control it, usually by deleting it from their records.

By providing users with clear, concise descriptions of its intentions, plenty of notice about pending changes, and the ability to take some control over one's own personal information, Google's new policy and the steps it has taken to implement it are really not as evil as some would have us believe, and I feel it raises the bar for all the Internet properties that want to collect and sell our information. The key for those who are concerned about this is to be vigilant, know who is collecting what about them, and keep abreast of tools and technologies for increasing one's privacy while online.

References

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